

Social, Political, Environmental, and Economic Change Through Contemporary Dance

Distinction Research Paper

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I. Introduction

I am interested in how school-aged students can be inspired to advocate for positive change in their communities. I see high school age students take to Facebook and Twitter to argue over injustices or wear T-shirts that make statements. In the creation of this dance unit, I asked myself "How can I use contemporary dance classes to inspire students to promote social, environmental, political, and economic change?"

While in high school, I was a student of the Akron School for the Arts in which I participated in a program similar to the one that exists at Fort Hayes Metropolitan Education Center. While in that program, I had difficulty making connections between movement practice classes like ballet, contemporary, and improvisation to current events and community issues. I created this unit in the hope that, at its completion, students will feel they have the tools to make dances surrounding justice topics they feel passionate about.

I had one main goal for myself in the creation of this project: Create and conduct contemporary dance classes to inspire students to promote social, environmental, political, and economic change. I created two goals for my students. At the successful completion of this class, students will demonstrate 1) an ability to critically analyze dance companies that use dance as a catalyst for change, and 2) increased understanding of theory, technique, and training practices in contemporary dance.

In order for the students to achieve these goals, I developed the following objectives that should be reached by the successful completion of this class. Student will exhibit: 1) a basic understanding of the principles of the pelvis, weight, and shift of weight 2) Efficiency when moving on and off the floor 3) increased awareness of the body's anatomy in relation to movement 4) Confidence and agency during improvisation as informed by Liz Lerman Dance

Exchange, Urban Bush Women, and Ananya Dance Theatre 5) Verbal skills to discuss how dance can impact people at a local and global level 6) Knowledge to transform dance theory generated from discussions to one's own movement.

II. Review of Research

Dance performance has a history of activism. It has been successful in bringing to light systems of injustice and promoting change. One such example is the Workers Dance League that developed in order to make dance training and performance accessible to working class people. Their slogan was, "Dance Is a Weapon in the Revolutionary Class Struggle" (Graff). This group created dance as agitation-propaganda, a tool to provide a direct message to audience members and was designed to make an impact. An example of one such dance was created by Workers Dance League member, Anna Sokolow. *Case History No.*, premiering in 1937, portrayed a homeless teenager and was an accusation of the lack of social services for teenagers in New York City (Kowal 92). With this information in mind, I believe in the power dance must be molded into a tool for social, political, environmental, and economic activism. It was this knowledge as well as a passion for dance and social justice that influenced my project and outlook on dance.

For this class, I chose three dance companies, Urban Bush Women, Dance Exchange, and Ananya Dance Theatre to research and present in three separate units during my time at Fort Hayes. Though all three dance companies use different approaches and speak unique messages, they are all devoted to using dance to make an impact both locally and globally.

Urban Bush Women (UBW) describes themselves as, “UBW continues to affect the overall ecology of the arts by promoting artistic legacies; projecting the voices of the underheard and people of color; bringing attention to and addressing issues of equity in the dance field and throughout the United States; and by providing platforms and serving as a conduit for culturally and socially relevant experimental art makers” (Urban Bush Women). In researching and planning classes about UBW, I chose to focus on their celebration of individualism during their rehearsal process as well as two of their dances that demonstrate how they interrogate culture’s beliefs about beauty and power in the United States. I chose *Batty Moves* and *Hair Stories* to present in class. In researching both dances, I discovered how UBW uses dance to bring awareness to the politicization of race and gender.

The next company that I researched was Dance Exchange (DX). I chose this group because they are unique in that their mission is to connect people of all ages and across communities to inspire change. I used the ground-breaking work by Liz Lerman, *Still Crossing* to exemplify how DX broke expectations in 1986 when Lerman highlighted the dancing abilities of elderly individuals, a historically overlooked population in Western concert dance (Dance Exchange). After, I researched *How to Lose a Mountain* and how DX executed a thorough research process to develop a dance that shows audience members the process of gathering energy from mountain top removal. In class, I made sure to discuss the methods that DX employs to engage communities with dance through residencies or in the case of *How to Lose a Mountain*, the “Moving Field Guide” which connects dance, science, nature, and people together.

The final company I chose for the students to learn about is Ananya Dance Theatre, a Contemporary Indian American dance company. They work to bring awareness to historically

marginalized groups by researching and presenting their struggles on the concert stage. They were conceived, “as a company of progressive (not just liberal) women artists of color from the Third World specifically to combat one of the most dangerous results of a pervasive lack of conversations among communities of color, without which creating a cooperative, mutually respectful society is ultimately impossible” (Swarr 149). Students learned about their unique dance vocabulary called Yorchha™, a blend of Odissi, Vinyasa Yoga, and Chhua (Ananya Dance Theatre). I took a deeper look into *Duurbar*, a dance about the literal and metaphorical weight that water carries for people in other parts of our world such as Ethiopia, Ghana, Tanzania and India (Swarr 152).

III. Method

My hopes with this project is that a similar unit could be implemented into a dance curriculum in public schools. After reviewing the Ohio Dance Standards, I determined that student goals and objectives align with what our state has determined to be important for high school aged dance students to master. With this information in mind, I chose to partner with a Columbus public school.

Setting: My teaching took place at Fort Hayes Metropolitan Education Center (FHMEC), located in East Columbus on Jack Gibbs Blvd. I taught the Dance II class which consists of students from 9th-12th grade. The prerequisite for this class is that students complete Dance I, which is a survey class on world dance styles and history. The race demographics during the fall quarter of 2016 when I taught are as follows: 75% Black, 14% White, 1.3% Native American, 4.8% multi-national, and 3.1% Latino (Ohio Department of

Education). This is compared to the most recent student demographics available about the Columbus Public Schools from 2013-2014 which show there are 56.0% Black, 26% White, 2% Native American, 5.5% multi-racial, 3.03% Asian, and 8.90% Latino (Columbus Public Schools). For seven weeks, I taught weekly classes on Mondays for 45 minutes and Tuesdays and Thursdays for 1.5 hours. I worked with a group of 13 (12 females and one male) students for the duration of the project. I partnered with FHMEC dance teacher and Ohio State Department of Dance graduate, Gaby Stefura. It is with her guidance and support that I was able to lead her class for this project. I taught in a large dance studio classroom that was outfitted in wooden floors and no mirrors. I had access to a projector to watch videos and display work and a sound system to play music.

Plans and Procedure: Each class period begins with what Gaby calls, “First Things First”; it is introductory question or prompt that students must answer. I structured the class so that Mondays are devoted to academic work regarding the dance companies I taught about. During this 45-minute class I presented excerpts of dance works, directed students to read articles or book excerpts, and lead discussion. During these classes I aimed for students to understand the history and theory behind these dance companies to best inform their dancing later in the week.

On Tuesday and Thursdays, I led a dance class with the following structure: students performed two set warm up sequences. The first elevated their heart rates and explored under-curves and over-curves and second explored spinal articulation, isolation of body parts, and stretching. Next, I taught and lead movement phrases across the floor. These combinations explored varying movement objectives such as moving in and out of the floor and using

weight shift. Finally, the culminating activity called upon students to use contemporary dance principles as well as dance theory generated from discussion to create their own dances. This dance making process was guided by my prompting and followed up through feedback that students gave each other following performance of the dances (sample lesson plans – Appendix A) Additionally, I assigned 1-2 homework assignments each week. These assignments asked students to read material pulled from scholarly articles and books and answer questions designed to assess comprehension and application to their own dance practices. (sample homework – Appendix).

Materials: I received a \$500 grant from the Arts Undergraduate Research Scholarship from the College of Arts and Sciences. This funding covered my travel expenses to and from Fort Hayes. Additionally, it paid for classroom materials including printer ink and paper and allowed for me to bring in guest artist Kaustavi Sarkar to give a master class in Odissi. I also received a \$700 grant from the Arts Initiative Barbara and Sheldon Pinchuk Arts Community Outreach Grant. This money allowed me to pay a videographer to capture six of my classes from multiple angles and film an interview of me discussing my project. The funding also paid for this footage to be edited into a short documentary about my senior project.

IV. Critical Analysis Reflection

Results: There are three main results that from this project. First, I learned how to research and conduct dance classes into a unit about dance for social, political, environmental, and economic change. This is the first time that I have taught a dance class unit that that is

heavily based on academic research, specifically about Urban Bush Women, DX, and ADT. I transferred this knowledge into classroom assignments and homework. When I began my research process and looked forward to what my culminating lessons plans would look like, I felt extremely overwhelmed and unconfident in my ability to do this project. Over the weeks leading up to my first session at Fort Hayes, I discovered that not only do I have the tools to teach contemporary dance, but I also have the skills to research and make lesson plans. This was a huge discovery and has increased my self-confidence in this area. As a teaching artist, I will continue to develop movement practice and curriculum with social awareness and action.

The next two results are objectives that the students reached. First, students demonstrated increased skill in foundations of contemporary dance. I used the same warm-up sequence virtually every class period. Due to its repetitive nature, the students practiced exploring the weight of their pelvis and spinal articulation. By introducing new concepts (such as head tail connection and shift of weight), students were given ample time to make self-discoveries. I witnessed improved confidence during sequences that moved across the floor. This was demonstrated to me through increases in the size and dynamic qualities of the movement as well as changes in focus from looking at the floor and others to a purposeful seeing.

Second, students deepened critical analysis about dance as exhibited through verbal, written, and movement articulation. The students were provided with many opportunities to practice verbal discussions about dance. Each class began with an introductory prompt (bell-work), that lead to discussions. For example, “Read excerpt from *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis* by Amanda Lock Swarr and watch *Duurbar* by ADT”. Then, I discussed with students ADT’s ethical research process and depiction of marginalized groups. Through

discussions such as these, students gained vocabulary to talk and write about dance. By engaging in dance making activities with their peers, students took their knowledge gained from readings, videos, and discussions to do research and make their own dances. Over time, I saw students gain greater awareness on how dynamics and group forms are read by audiences.

Greater Significance: Given the United States' systemic injustices in the public-school system, there is a need now more than ever for social justice educators. According to Katsarou, Picoewer, and Stovall, three distinguished academics and teachers, social justice education “speak[s] to the day-to-day processes and actions utilized in classrooms and communities centered in critical analysis, action, and reflection (praxis) amongst all educational stakeholders (students, families, teachers, administrators, community organizations, community members) with the goal of creating tangible change in their communities, cities, states, nation, and the larger world” (Katsarou, Picoewer, Stovall 139). It is my goal to work towards being a social justice educator. I believe that if units, such as the one I taught, were implemented into dance programs in the public-school system, that students will be more likely to use dance as a means for social justice. If this unit were to be implemented, it would need to go another step further to create tangible change.

Additionally, it is worth noting that my class at Fort Hayes engaged with the Advanced Achievement Level Content Statements of the grade 9-12 Dance Standards for Ohio. Some examples of standards I met are, “Examine ways in which various dance works relate to the themes and issues” and “Explain how a choreographer’s philosophy, heritage and cultural traditions influenced his or her choreography of their historical, global and social contexts” (Ohio Department of Education).

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Appendix A

From Monday, November 7, 2016

Description: Introduce Liz Lerman Dance Exchange and how the company innovated during their earlier years

Objectives

1. Give students a brief overview of Liz Lerman Dance Exchange
2. Exemplify how Dance Exchange brought forth new ideas about who has the right to dance

Goals

1. View *Still Crossing* excerpts to show how Liz Lerman pushed the boundaries in 1986 of what bodies are “allowed to dance”
2. Students watch Residency at Saint John’s on the Lake and discuss topics brought up through this viewing
3. Use Delayed Mirroring as a way to introduce one of DX’s methods to engage communities with dance

First Things First

1. View excerpts from *Still Crossing* <https://vimeo.com/117516197>
2. Describe the dancers. What do they look like?
 - a. Mostly white people, ages ranging from young to elderly
3. Describe the movement.
 - a. Full bodied dancing for company members, gestural movement for elderly and large group

Residency at Saint John’s on the Lake <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eE6hrhuoD6E>

Questions for discussion

1. How is dance helping these elderly individuals?
 - a. Touching, often people in old homes don’t get touched or have the opportunity to touch others, we often take that for granted
 - b. Empathy, my own grandma lives in assisted living and really only thinks of herself
 - c. Physical health, helping them to gain balance, strength, flexibility, coordination
2. Are the participants from the assisted living home artists?
 - a. Yes, because we saw them create and put movement together into dances

- b. They used creativity and innovative ideas
- c. How do we define who an artist is anyways

Get Up and Move: Delayed Mirror; taken directly for DX toolbox

1. **“Be” Your Partner** Participants choose partners and face one another. While one stands comfortably and naturally, the other observes, taking in as much detail as possible. The observing partner mirrors by “becoming” the partner: capturing the partner’s stance, carriage, weight distribution, and habits of positioning particular body parts. Then the observed partner makes very small movements, such as repositioning of hands or gradual shifting of weight. Still keeping focus on such qualities as stance and weight distribution, the other partner follows, reproducing the small movements as immediately and accurately as possible. Partners shake out and switch.
2. **Sequential Mirroring** The first partner improvises a short series of movements. When the phrase is complete, the second partner mirrors by repeating the phrase as closely as possible. They repeat this process three times, shake out and switch roles.
3. **Theme and Variation** The sequence follows the same pattern as step 2, but now the partner who follows intentionally creates a variation on the first partner’s movement. Repeat three times and switch roles. (The leader of the activity can suggest particular ways to make variations and/or ask the group for ways that movement could be varied: change levels, speed, body parts. Once participants have had the experience, they can share additional strategies.)

Homework

1. Students read excerpt from *Hiking the Horizontal* by Liz Lerman, “The Roosevelt Dancing”, pg 43 – 46.
2. Complete worksheet based upon the reading.

From Tuesday, November 1, 2016

Description: Students discover how the addition of text/speaking can aid in dance story telling

Objectives

1. Exemplify how dance can be aided with speaking
2. Allow speaking to influence the way students relate to movement

Goals

1. View excerpt of *Walking with Pearl... Southern Diaries* and discuss the effectiveness of speaking
2. Use poems commenting on social issues to affect change in students' movement
3. Students respond to speaking by altering movement choice through use of space, time, and dynamic

First Things First

1. View excerpt from *Walking with Pearl... Southern Diaries*
<https://vimeo.com/62991162> (0:00-1:15)
2. **How does the use of speaking affect how the viewer sees the dancing?**
 - a. Speaking is narrative so I see the movement as telling a story
 - b. Often movements are very literal and the dancer describes the words with her body
 - c. Speaking adds rhythm to dancing

Warm-up

Heart rate up <i>Din Da Da</i> The Roots	16 bounces in parallel first, 16 bounces in 2 nd , 16 facing back, 8 front, 8 back, 4 front, 4 back, 2 front, 2 back, 2 front, 2 back. 8 under curves, series under curve R, L, twice R. Repeat R, L, R, L. Repeat R, L, R, L this time traveling around the room to a new spot. Under curve front to center, side to center, back to center, circle the arms. Repeat. 8 over curves side to side. 8 over curves with swiping arm. 8 over curves with side body curve. Repeat this time moving front and back.	Bounces are about finding weight of the pelvis. Under curve initiation comes from swing and weight of pelvis. Note difference between under curve and over curve. Pendulum swing of the arms.
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Sustained with small stretches <i>Slow Blues</i> Wu-Tang Clan	High curve front, side back side to R. Repeat with R arm. High curve front, side, back, side to L. Repeat with L arm. Second 4 bounces, 4 th one takes arms up to forward fold over legs, uncurl. Repeat 3 more times. 8 faster bounces over legs. Slow down with 4 demi plie stretches, uncurl. Lunge over to R, pulse in lung to straight 3 times. Repeat to L.	Find weight in head in high curve. Smooth circle Lung is not a bounce of a lengthening. Look for correct lunge position
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Across Floor

Under Curve Fast <i>Blood and Form</i> Mount Kimbie	In half time - under curve forward with R leg step together, repeat L. Step out R, cross behind L, twist, step together. Repeat whole thing across the floor. In 1 8cts	Pelvis carrying body through space. Wide steps.
Swings <i>Before I Move Off</i> Mount Kimbie	Swing R leg front 1ct, swing L leg front 1ct, swing R left front back front, 2ct. Repeat all on L	Don't care about shape of working leg. About find ease in swing and taking up space with each step.
Sit Roll <i>Listen</i> Wu-Tang Clan	Step out R, back L, around R, reach to side lunge with arm L 4ct, sit roll R to stand up 4ct. <i>Get up 2ct, drop swing 2ct, fall recovery onto L leg and back to center 4ct. Repeat to L once they are competent on each side.</i>	Finding fluidity and ease in roll. Using weight and pelvis to ease into floor.

Center

1. Teach new movement to students and allow time for them to integrate the addition into longer phrase.
2. Take away music and have students perform phrase in silence
3. Introduce idea of dancing to speaking help determine phrasing rather than musical cues
4. The goal is for students to have a relationship with the text and respond to it through changes in timing, space, and dynamic.
5. Using *Let America Be America Again* by Langston Hughes. Read poem alone so students get to just listen. Give history on Hughes for context.

<p>Combo</p> <p><i>Use Me</i></p> <p>Bill Withers</p>	<p>Step out R, cross behind L, twist, step together, jump to 2nd 4ct. Under curve R, L, R with a turn 4ct. Reach out with arms to wide 2nd over R leg 4ct, use pelvis to swing body up L, R, L, R 4ct. Same jump out to 2nd, jump forward 3 times while arms rise 4ct. High curve with arm front side back 2ct, fall back in 3 steps to R lunge reaching R arm out 2ct. R arms sweeps while pelvis takes body in and out of lunge twice 4ct. Step out R, cross behind L, twist, step together, 4ct. Over curve with swiping arms 4 moving front 4ct, 1 R, 1 L 2ct, 2 backwards 2ct. Step out R, back L, around R, reach to side lunge with arm L 4ct, sit roll R w/ L arm reaching 4ct, sit roll to L w/ R arm reaching 4ct. Swing R leg to lunge 2ct, assemble legs together fall L leg out 2ct.</p>	<p>Integrating movement material from earlier in class into phrase. Once students have the material take away sound and finally add speaking.</p> <p>Encourage students to reflect what they hear in the text and respond with changes in their movement.</p>
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Appendix B

Name_____

Date_____

Read the excerpt from *Twenty Years of African American Dance Theater, Community Engagement, and Working It Out* by Nadine George-Graves.

Based on the reading, describe how Jawole incorporates and collaborates with her dancers during the rehearsal process.

Respond to the reading by describing two ways in which your personal histories, culture, or experiences shape the way that you dance.

1.

2.